Abridged too far? Credit Transfer: Examining the transition process from TAFE to University

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In responding to a global audience, universities are increasingly bound up in priorities of maintaining viability within landscapes of globalised market imperatives, and with changing paradigms of purpose; universities need to be accessible to all. In Australia, pathways to university provided by Credit Transfer have increased student mobility; the dichotomy however, is that alongside discourses of inclusivity is the need for students to adjust to the often rigorous academic demands of higher education. This paper examines the Bachelor of Communication and Media at the University of Wollongong (UOW), and the Diploma of Communication & Media Studies at the Illawarra Institute of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). Some of the common challenges transitioning students face in their first year at UOW are discussed, including; adapting to different workloads and the demands of self-directed, independent learning. A potential solution is a pre- university entry induction program for TAFE students.

Keywords: *transition, credit transfer, advanced standing, Mezirow, transformation*

Introduction

As a response to globalisation, the impetus for lifelong learning has resulted in many changes in approaches to access and participation in higher education (HE). The motivation to continue tertiary study is often career advancement, or simply to maintain viability in the workforce. One of the ways HE in Australia has risen to the challenge set by global market and political forces is to diversify entry pathways to university. One approach to achieving this is through Credit Transfer from Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector providers such as institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) to university. Credit Transfer confers various levels of Advanced Standing in some degree courses, a move endorsed by TAFE institutes, which have enthusiastically embraced this burgeoning development. DEST statistics (cited in Watson 2008: 40) show that between 2001 and 2005, the number of students admitted to university on the basis of a TAFE award increased by 46%, while 'the proportion of students gaining credit (or exemption) for previous TAFE study increased from 2.4 per cent to 4.3 per cent [from 1994-2006] (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008: 192).

However, given that different skills sets are applicable for TAFE and university, some TAFE students' experience difficulties in the initial stages of their degree, particularly as with Advanced Standing, they may bypass first year of university completely. Some of these difficulties and the associated challenges will be discussed here, with particular emphasis on the ways in which pre-emptive measures may realistically be put into place to enable smoother transitioning for TAFE to university cohorts, and in the process help to alleviate negative outcomes some disaffected students experience. As global learning imperatives increasingly assume centre stage in tertiary education, the OECD (2009) points to the need for individual organisations to attend to globalisation in ways best

suited to local needs, that is, a 'glonacal agency heuristic' approach is advocated (Marginson & Rohades, 2002, in Vaira, 2004: 486) when implementing global knowledge paradigms in policies and practices at local level. In viewing this issue from a local lens therefore, the Bachelor of Communication and Media Studies (BCMS) at the University of Wollongong (UOW) and the Diploma of Communication & Media Studies at the Illawarra Institute of TAFE will be examined. Reference to the Learning Development Centre (LD) at UOW will also be made as this unit provides academic support where required.

Challenges for transitioning students

Increased and developed pathways to university have seen the emergence of greater heterogeneity of student groups, with concomitantly diverse ranges of skills, knowledge and needs, and with this comes some well documented challenges. Watson (2008) points out that granting Advanced Standing [through the Credit Transfer process] to transitioning students, often results in students facing university expectations of academic literacies equivalent to second year, without the advantage of first year acquisition at university, in which development of such skills is more likely to occur. Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales (2008: xxi) while urging the maintenance of 'academic standards 'and 'quality of education' also acknowledge there are often problems with academic expectations, which can lead to difficulties for students, especially as they are often expected to know more than they actually do. Insufficient academic literacies include the ability to apply abstraction to writing and to develop a high level of critical and conceptual analysis, and the ability to demonstrate depth of theoretical understanding (Watson, 2008). Similarly, Peter Bradbury, a teacher at Illawarra TAFE (Bradbury, P, personal communication, May29, 2012) when reflecting on his experiences with TAFE students, suggests that because TAFE is largely 'vocationally' focused, many students do not have the literacy levels required for university success. This dilemma is apparent in those students who present at Learning Development for remedial assistance, and therefore, a comprehensive and realistic look at the measures which may be implemented for students is needed.

Further exacerbating this lack of academic expertise, are other difficulties, for example; (Milne and Gabb (2007) point to differences in expectations of assessment; while Biggs (2003 in Gabb & Glaisher, 2006) points out the difficulties many students have in using unfamiliar university Information Technology (IT), an issue which is on-going as universities are increasingly engaging in a 'techno-centerist discourse' (Clegg, Hudson & Steel, 2003:48). Arguably, without IT skills in the initial stages of a degree course, inexperienced IT learners are already at a disadvantage compared to other cohorts. Furthermore, the pervasive quality of IT is a development that is increasingly embedded in learning, and therefore likely to be a determining precursor of engagement and success for many learners. In real terms for the BCMS cohort at UOW this means mastery of for example, eLearning, ereadings, postings, chats, forums and SOLS; the primary forms of administrative communications throughout the university. This issue is reflected upon by Peter Bradbury, who confirms that TAFE students often lack these rudimentary skills, as IT is not as extensively used in the TAFE system as it is at UOW (P.Bradbury, personal communication, May 29, 2012).

As Fuller and Chalmers (1997) and Gabb & Glaisher (2006) point out there are also the problems associated with different experiences in learning and pedagogical approaches between TAFE and university, which in turn often create different understandings. Cameron (n.d) refers to 'inconsistency in standards' (between TAFE and university work), while Walls and Pardy (2010) found that TAFE teachers were aware of differences in workloads for students, which could be potentially problematic for transitioning students. Similarly, Milne & Gabb (2006) in their study of transitioning 1st year students, noted that students found the different workloads (between school and HE, or TAFE and HE) to be particularly challenging. Cameron (n.d) refers also to the amount of independent study required in HE and the need for students to be self-motivated and autonomous to a greater degree than they have previously experienced [at TAFE]. While Scutter, Palmer, Luzeckyj, Burke da Silva & Brinkworth (2011) in their study into expectations of newly enrolled university students found that students underestimated the amount of time needed for independent study. These are all issues facing students who access LD and which

inform a number of different support programs UOW has in place, but which nevertheless, must be dealt with by students while they are also simultaneously struggling to achieve academic goals within limited timeframes.

On the positive side however, Walls and Pardy (2010) found that while many TAFE to university students were able to identify expected challenges and issues, attitudinal differences about these challenges were apparent and a key factor in success. In his theory of transformational learning, Mezirow (1981: 6) discusses 'perspective transformation' in which learners may be emancipated from their cultural and historical understandings, or previously accepted and assumed ideas of who they are. Peter Bradbury (personal communication, May29, 2012) confirms that many TAFE students lack a belief in their ability to complete a university degree, an issue he sees as a sense of a 'divide' between the assumed identity of a 'vocational' student and that of an 'academic'. In other words, student identity is often bound up in 'limiting' assumptions of self as learner. Mezirow saw this as one of the most important challenges of education, and to this end felt that andragogy could 'reinforce the self-concept of the learner as a 'learner' (1981: 22). Given the andragogical imperative of redefining beliefs and assumptions about learning, it may be argued that while pathways encourage students to step out of their 'comfort zone', in the process they also need to perceive themselves differently, that is, the subjective self as learner may need to be established before success takes place.

Many former TAFE students present at LD with a lack of confidence in their ability to produce academic work, which may indicate that while transition pathways provide the access, transformational learning may provide the means to succeed.

Further, while not necessarily systematised in explicit realms of policy and practice in HE, andragogical assumptions are nevertheless representative of a paradigm of independent learning at tertiary level. Mezirow (1981:21) emphasises the value of 'self-directed learning' for adults and states that andragogical approaches are most likely to facilitate this. However, by adopting a 'proactive' rather than 'reactive'

stance (Knowles, 1973: 14, in Smith, 2002), transitioning students moving from the more 'nurturing' and guided environment of TAFE classrooms into an environment where there is an assumption of independent learning, must also assume greater responsibility for the learning process. This may be very challenging and has indeed proven to be the case for many former TAFE students presenting at LD. Peter Bradbury endorses this view when he describes the university environment as much larger and more impersonal for many former TAFE students than they have previously been accustomed to (P. Bradbury, personal communication, May29, 2012). Embedding the capability of rising to these challenges may be one important outcome of pre-commencement programs.

Potential solutions

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (2011: 19) in acknowledging the vision of UOW supports the implementation of 'first year experience programs and support across the University', and indeed this is the case; LD being just one avenue of this support. Also, in its most recent report, UOW emphasised the need for 'non-traditional' groups to be represented under the umbrella of social inclusion, including domestic students, such as TAFE cohorts (UOW Strategic Planning, 2012). Therefore, in order for Credit Transfer to work to the benefit of students, gaps in equivalencies need to be addressed and strategies put in place to deal with these (Gabb and Glaisher, 2006). The question remains however, of how best this can be done; the answer usually focuses on remedial actions to be taken after commencement of university and includes many well established strategies. For example, successful articulation requires active management of transition (Young 2005 in Gabb & Glaisher, 2006); use of collaborative learning approaches in first year HE units (Milne and Gabb, 2007: v); closer collaboration between TAFE and university regarding different expectations required (Cameron and Cohen et al, in Cameron, n.d); improving 'academic orientation' of new students (Milne & Gabb, 2007) and awareness by academic staff of the needs of such students (Klinger & Murray, 2011). These are all useful and pertinent suggestions, however, through their primarily 'reactive' stance; they also provide scope for a new approach.

A pre-commencement induction program - TAFE to HE

With vision, flexibility and the adoption of a different way of viewing the transition process, there is scope for a pre- commencement induction program of study skills for TAFE students about to enter university for the first time. According to Professor Stephen Brown, Sub Dean of the Faculty of Arts at UOW (Brown, S, personal communication, May29 2012) one of the issues facing staff is that there is no explicit information on which students have articulated from TAFE, as such staff are often unaware of the challenges these students face in their daily academic lives. Professor Brown stresses the need for on-going research regarding the progress of this particular cohort of students, with a view to establishing protocols of awareness of potential obstacles for such students. Also, given the often evident 'knowledge gap' of Credit Transfer students, a pre-commencement approach is supported by Watson (2008) and Tickell and Smyrnios (2005) who advocate development of 'dedicated orientation programs'. From experience in LD is apparent that such programs should include orientation to HE academic literacies such as critical thinking, analytical writing, use of theoretical rigour and depth, independent research skills and IT skills. Walls and Pardy (2010) found that some TAFE courses were attempting to include elements of preparation for HE but these elements were not systemic or particularly prominent. Peter Bradbury (Bradbury, P, personal communication, May29, 2012) points to the Access Employment Education and Training (AEET) Framework Reaccreditation document produced by TAFE (2011), which aims to diversify articulation pathways, so that future TAFE courses will be divided into two strands: vocational and further study. As a teacher at the 'coalface' at TAFE, he advocates a core compulsory induction program for intending further study students to be managed from TAFE but which should include elements of university on-site orientation.

If a pre-university induction program is to be considered, there can be no doubt that it must include the applications and recognition of characteristics of adult learning including Knowles' (1973, in Smith, 2002) notions of the principles of self-directed learning; the potential for adult learners to use experiential learning; and as Smith (2002)

asserts, they need to be ready, oriented and motivated to learn. Peter Bradbury (Bradbury, P, personal communication, May29, 2012) believes that under such circumstances TAFE students may begin to adopt that identity so elemental to a sense of engagement with university life, and by applying these concepts, essentially, students' ideas of self as learner may be developed in ways which engender dialogues of success rather than struggle. A pre-commencement program is one way of assisting in this endeavour.

Conclusion

Although this has been a small example and divergent issues may be identified in other courses, while different institutes may have different challenges, unarguably, the interconnectedness of tertiary educational institutes in this age of globalisation means that the reality of the challenges for transitioning students needs to be accommodated. If institutes such as Illawarra TAFE and UOW in their efforts to rise to the global knowledge paradigm, enable learning bridges to be built, then it is incumbent upon them to implement transparent measures, which facilitate successful student transition, while remaining competitive, current and market viable. Innovative enabling strategies in terms of pre-university learning for transitioning students would go some way towards engendering paradigms of success in ways which provide a win- win outcome for all stakeholders.

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Following ten years' experience working as a teacher at TAFE Illawarra, Theresa gained a Master's degree in TESOL at UTS, after which she began working in Learning Development at the University of Wollongong, where she still works. Theresa is currently a Doctoral student researching the challenges facing TAFE transitioning students in their first year at university, and the strategies they use for success in their studies.

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